

*A Comp's-Eye* VIEW OF

. . . *Punctuation*











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Emerson G. Wulling

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. - ' ! ' - .

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## THE MARKS OF PUNCTUATION

are by printers called POINTS.

Interestingly, both words come from the

Latin root *punct*,—*punctuation* rather directly, and *point* through French. So also does the word *puncture*. Quite literally the printer's points puncture the row of words for the benefit of quick comprehension.

The puncturing process goes back to early days when spacing between words was an innovation. TRYREADINGWORDSRUNTOGETHER WITHOUTSPACEBETWEENTHEM.

I have seen manuscripts so closely word spaced that the space was imperceptible. According to Jan Tschichold, a scholarly modern Swiss practitioner of calligraphy,



word spacing emerged in the seventh century. Rudimentary spacing was present in Roman stone inscriptions, such as the well known Trajan capitals dated A.D. 114; but the space is occupied by triangular flicks from the chisel.

By the time printers came on the scene calligraphers had established word spacing as a universal practice and had also developed elementary marks of punctuation, notably the period: low (.), middle (·), and high (°) as described in Donatus's *Grammar*; the colon (:); the hyphen (-); and the virgule: full (/) and half (′). But there was little uniformity in the usage from office to office. William Blades in his *William Caxton*, in writing about the fumbling use of points by early printers, wryly wonders if they kept all points in one box and picked them up haphazardly. Nevertheless, to the printers may go credit for extending and eventually systematizing punctuation into



our present use. Punctuation still has some variables that concern printers and their proofreaders so much that every house has its own style book, such as the University of Chicago's *Manual of Style* and the Oxford University Press's *Rules for Compositors and Readers*, both rather different from each other and from AP and MLA styles.

Linguists want to extend pointing to indicate various degrees of pitch, stress, inflection, and juncture for purposes of close notation. With this close pointing goes attention to an alphabet which has more precise phonemic value than the 26-letter one now in use. But such an exact system of pointing and phonemic alphabetizing is beyond the printer's, and the typewriter's, usual equipment.

Points now ordinarily available are:

. , : ; ! ? ' -

If to these points are added dashes, paren-



theses, brackets, and signals implicit in capitals, italics, small caps, reference marks, and spacing (between words, paragraphs, and sections), the printer has a signalling system for puncturing rows of words that is quite varied. It offers authors a great range of effect.

Note what a short passage looks like when Thomas Carlyle gets into stride. He uses almost every mark in one paragraph, and the rest are near by.

#### HERR TEUFELSDROECKH ON TOOLS

He can say to himself: 'Tools? Thou hast no tools? Why, there is not a Man, or a Thing, now alive but has tools. The basest of created animalcules, the Spider itself, has a spinning-jenny, and a warping-mill, and a power-loom within its head: the stupidest of Oysters has a Papin's-Digester, with stone-and-lime house to hold it in: every being that can live can do something: this let him *do*.—Tools? Hast thou not a Brain, furnished, furnishable with some



glimmerings of Light: and three fingers to hold a Pen withal? Never since Aaron's Rod went out of practice, or even before it, was there such a wonder-working Tool: greater than all recorded miracles have been performed by Pens. For strangely in this so solid-seeming World, which nevertheless is in continual restless flux, it is appointed that *Sound*, to appearance the most fleeting, should be the most continuing of all things. The WORD is well said to be omnipotent in this world; man, thereby divine, can create as by a *Fiat*. Awake, arise! Speak forth what is in thee; what God has given thee, what the Devil shall not take away. Higher task than that of Priesthood was allotted to no man: wert thou but the meanest in that sacred Hierarchy, is it not honour enough therein to spend and be spent?'

—*Sartor Resartus*, chapter 10





HOW MUCH POINTING is desirable? In these latter days the style is toward open punctuation, perhaps under the influence of journalistic writing. Newspapers try to say it quickly and simply. While a comma may guide the eye through a closely packed sentence, it is also an interrupter; and if a sentence needs to be clarified, then it may be clumsy and not to be encouraged. Furthermore a comma takes something from the ink supply and weighs a pound in the run of a big daily newspaper, an expense!

Close punctuation aids the periodic sentence with its precision and formality. Open punctuation with a slight sprinkling of commas encourages the rambling informality of the loose sentence. For example, note the difference between the following



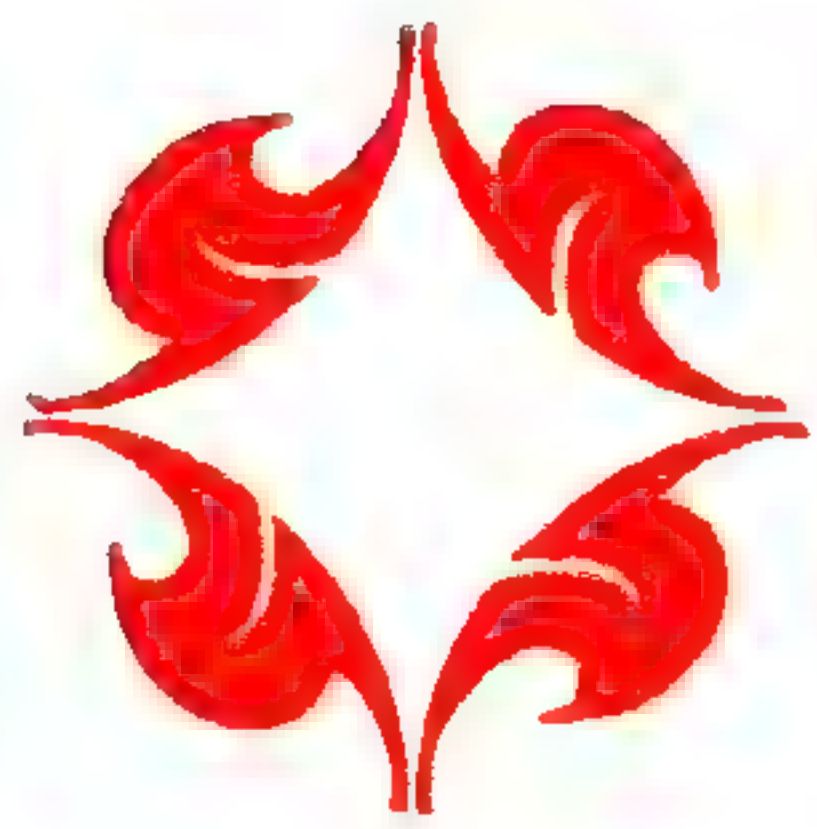
passages, the first, tightly packed and artfully timed; the second, easy and fluid — both thoughtful.

Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening. (*Pater*)

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. (*Lincoln*)

But effects can not be guaranteed merely by counting points. After all, pointing is an art integral with composition. It extends personality. It is part of the message.





NOW FOR ANOTHER TACK. What shape is a period mark? \* The most frequent shape is a circle. But squares, lozenges, triangles, crosses, and ovals have been used for shape. I can illustrate three from my cases:



The shapes of the other marks are assimilated to those of the periods. The question

\* A period is a sentence. A period mark is a signal that a sentence has ended. This distinction is not always understood. For everyday use, *period* means the mark, not the sentence. The Oxford English Dictionary cites as the earliest written use of *period* in the present sense Brinsley, *Lud. Lit.*, 1612: "In reading, that [the scholar] doe it distinctly, reading to a period or full point, and there to stay." The same source quotes Puttenham, *Eng. Poesie*, 1589, as identifying the colon as part of the period, and a comma as part of the colon. In 1748 the idea of quantity competes with the idea of grammatical parts as illustrated by J. Mason, *Elocut.*: "A comma stops the voice while we may privately tell one, a semi-Colon two; a Colon three: and a period four."

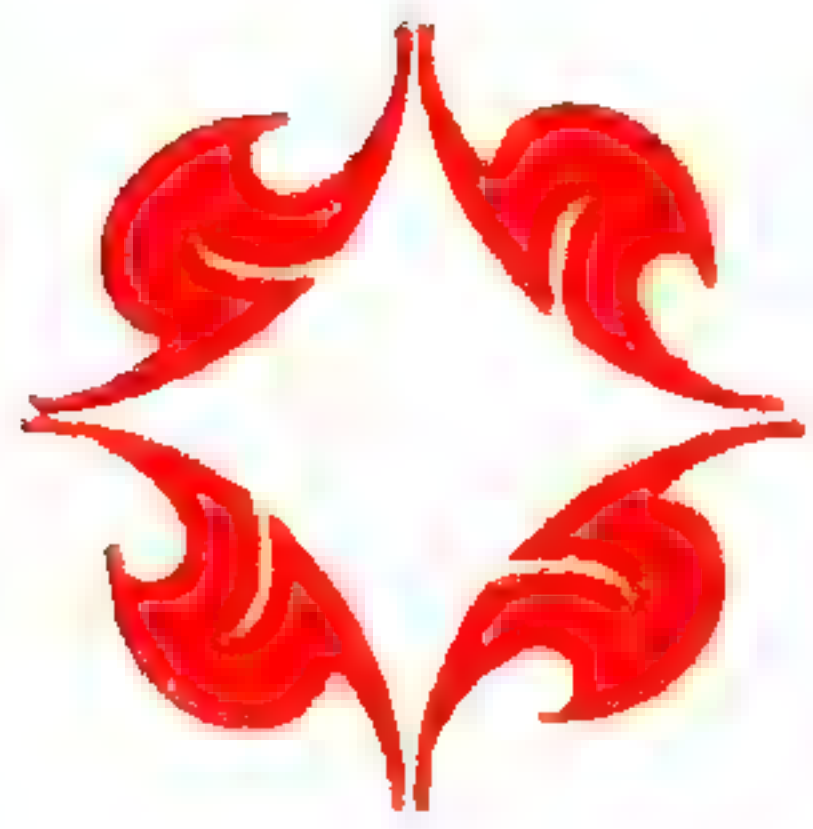


mark has the most variations; for example:  
all 12-pt.    ?   ?   ?   ?   **?**   ?   ?

Gutenberg's question mark was something like ours upside down over a period. Other early printers used a similar wavy, rising line, apparently to signal the rising voice of the question.

Virgules as alternatives to commas were early marks, and Victor Hammer has kept them as being both historic and pleasant. Looking for shape may be a minor quest, but it has interest.





**A PRACTICAL MATTER**, after the printer has selected and planned his shape and range of marks, is setting them.

If the marks are thin, they need, in the interest of clarity, to be hair spaced away from the words they follow. If thick, they had better be set close. But ideally, they should be neither thin nor thick (these are relative terms, of course) and should be put on the type body with a bit of air on both sides. Then no special spacing will be required, and the nineteenth century custom of extra space after the full stop (still observed in some shops) will be redundant and awkward. For example:

**NORMAL SPACING**

They follow words. It is correct.

**HAIR SPACE BEFORE THE MARK**

They follow words. It is correct.



#### HAIR BEFORE AND EXTRA AFTER

They follow words. It is correct.

If the tall marks (! ? : ;) are not placed on wide shoulders, then a hair extra on each side will keep them from crowding the adjacent words. For example:

#### NO SPACING

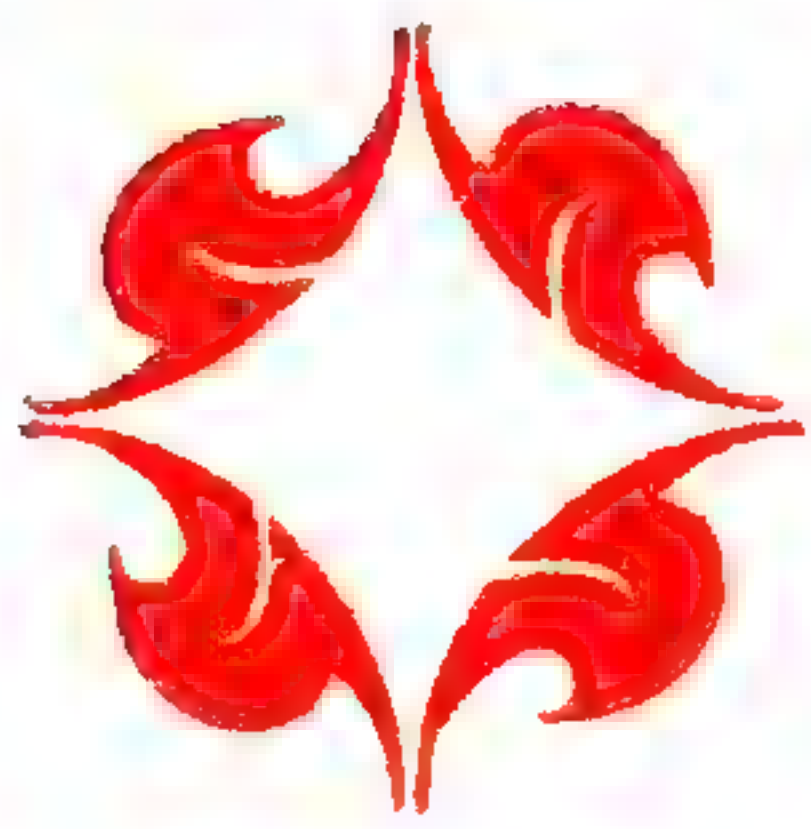
What did you see? Nothing much.

#### SLIGHTLY SPACED

What did you see? Nothing much.

These are little matters that have their little tempests. Good sense suggests adjusting practice to the fonts, each of which has its own peculiarities; but even so, some printers choose options toward close setting or toward wide setting. John Henry Nash was such a close setter of points, and of words too, that he almost returned to the early days of no space between words. He was trying to avoid rivers.





WORSE THAN RIVERS, I think, are holes, especially those created by periods and commas outside quotes. For example:

He was a “hedonist”. He enjoyed life.

What is that period doing over toward the beginning of the next sentence? This is a practice common in England and becoming common in the United States.

Here is a dilemma. Logically, if the quoted matter is internal to the sentence the period should come outside the quotes, because the period is the point that ends everything, including all parts of the sentence. But optically, the outside period looks lost. Looks or logic—which? This dilemma is noticeable only with the small points, the period and the comma. The tall points look all right in the logical position:

Was he a “hedonist”? He enjoyed life.



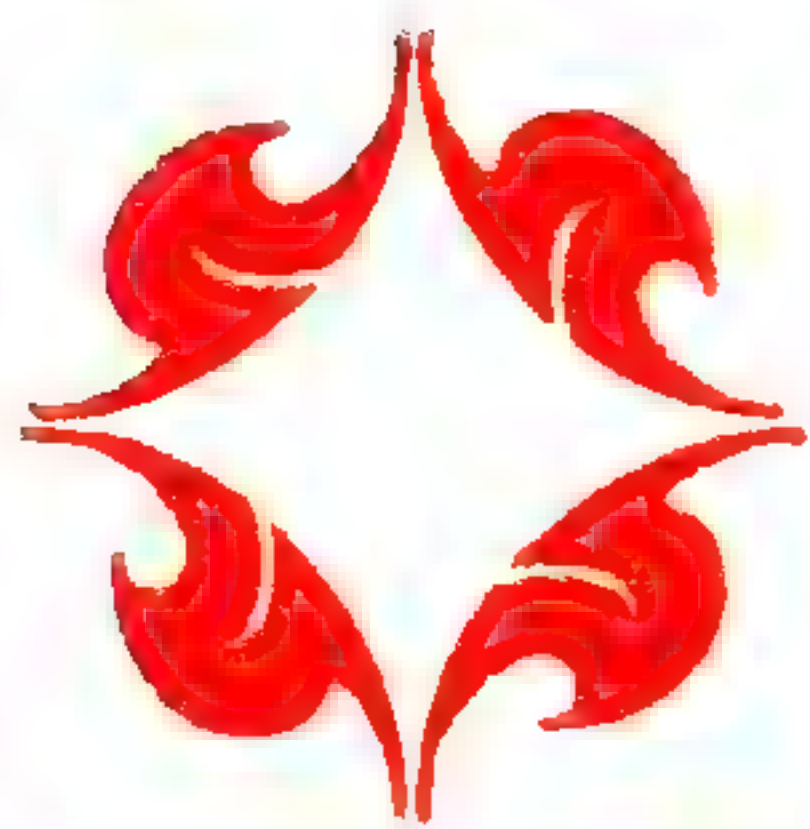
I have my definite choice. If I can not have both looks and logic, I will take looks in this instance.

He was a "hedonist." He enjoyed life. People may not agree about the looks of the thing, granted. Yet like it or not, the escaped period leaves a hole in the texture of the text.\*

Points are indeed aiders of the eye. They translate into pause, pitch, inflection, and stress, somewhat unsystematically, it is true, but nevertheless understandably if one is native to the language.

\*The assumption is that a printed page should hold together, should have a uniform texture. The whole gamut of points, caps, italics, reference marks, notes, and spacing creates another dilemma. These "differences" are intended to aid the eye; but if they are too different, they distract the eye by rending the texture. The problem is to keep the differences within the tolerance of the experienced eye.





I CLOSE WITH A PASSAGE which looks curious to us but which advocates a sound, in fact a basic, principle of pointing, none other than the “cunning” use of points to make sentences “light.” It is taken from a work entitled *Ascensius declynsons with the Plain Expositor*, without date, place, or printer’s name, 4to. This work is ascribed to Wynkyn de Worde from a peculiar type which is found in his *Ortus Vocabulorum*. I am indebted for this information to C. H. Timperley, *A Dictionary of Printers and Printing*, London, 1839, page 210, and I follow copy exactly, a tricky task.

## OF THE CRAFT OF POYNTING

THERBE FIVE MANER pontys, and diuisions most uside with cunnying men : the which, if they be well vsid, make the sentens very light, and



esy to vnderstand both to the reder, & the herer and they be these : virgil, come, parenthesis, playnt poynt, & interrogatif. A vergil is a sclender stryke : lenyng fyrwarde thiswyse, be tokynyng a lytyl, short rest without any perfectness yet of sentens : as betwene the fwe poyntis a fore rehersed. A come is with tway titils this wyse : betokynyng a longer rest : and the sentens yet ether is vnperfet : or els, if it be perfet : ther cunmith more after, longyng to it : the which more comynly can not be perfect by itself without at the lest summat of it : that gothe a fore. A parenthesis is with tway crokyd virgils : as an olde mone, & a neu bely to bely : the whiche be set on theton afore the begynyng & thetother after the latyr ende of a clause : comyng within an other clause : that may be perfect thof the clause, so comyng betwene : wer away and therefore it is sowndyde comynly a note lower, than the vtter clause. yf the sentens can not be perfet without the ynnere clause, then stede of the first crokyde virgil a streght virgil wol do very wel : and stede of the later must nedis be a come. A playne point is with won titill thiswyse. & it cumeth after the ende of al the whole sentens betokinyng a longe rest. An



interrogatif is with tway titils ; the vpper rys-  
yng this wyse ? & it cumeth after the ende of  
a whole reason : wheryn ther is sum question  
axside. the whiche ende of the reson, triying as  
it were for an answeare : risyth vpwarde. we haue  
made these rulis in englisshe : by cause they  
be as profitable, and necessary to be kepte  
in euery mother tunge, as in latin.











onē? Et pro

cū : quā

ib. et esau. Et

*Details from the 42-line Bible, showing Gutenberg's principal points: the interrogative, the colon and the hyphen, and the mid and low periods.*









*Two hundred copies*

*Warren's Olde Style & Linweave Early American*

*ATF Bulmer type*



















